

**The Effect of Learning English on Algerian EFL  
Learners' Cultural Identity**

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**Abstract:** Identity is constructed by the language people speak and the language they speak is formed by their identity. The problem arises when prolonged contact with a foreign language (L2) causes irremediable destabilization of the individual's sense of self. Previous research has shown that the culture accompanying the language of globalization either subtracts from or adds to the individual's existing cultural identity. More precisely, it was found that English language learners undergo significant identity conflicts in the process of learning English. This article is a quantitative and qualitative study which seeks to explore whether or not Algerian EFL learners construct a new identity as a result of learning English. Results from the interview and questionnaire answered by 178 English major Mater 2 students of Language and Culture at Batna 2 University revealed that most of the participants did not construct a new foreign language identity. For the few participants, who claimed to have constructed one, they regarded their L2 identities as complementary to their L1 ones, rather than being in conflict with them.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language; culture; identity; identity construction; globalization

## تَعَلُّمُ اللُّغَةِ الْإِنْجَلِيزِيَّةِ كَلُغَةٍ أَعْجَنِيَّةٍ وَأَثَرُهُ عَلَى الْهُوِيَّةِ الثَّقَافِيَّةِ لِمَتَعَلِّمِيهَا

طبي سعيدة

**المخلص:** يتم بناء الهوية من خلال اللغة التي يتحدث بها الناس والتي تتشكل من هويتهم، ويتجلى المشكل حينما يطول التواصل عن طريق اللغة الأجنبية فيتسبب في زعزعة شعور الفرد بذاته. مع انتشار اللغة الإنجليزية كمظهر من مظاهر الإمبريالية اللغوية يرى بعض الباحثين أن هذه الأخيرة تلعب دورًا تدخليًا يتعارض مع السلامة اللغوية والثقافية للدول الأخرى، وقد أظهرت الأبحاث السابقة أن الثقافة المصاحبة للغة العولمة إما تنقص أو تزيد من الهوية الثقافية للفرد، أي أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية يتعرضون لتضارب كبير في الهوية أثناء عملية تعلمها، وقد اعتمدت هذه الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي لمعرفة ما إذا كان متعلموا اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يبنون هوية جديدة نتيجة لتعلمها وكشفت نتائج المقابلة الشفهية والاستبيان الذي أجاب عليه 178 طالب لغة إنجليزية ماستر 2 تخصص لغة وثقافة من جامعة باتنة 2 أن معظم المشاركين لم يبنوا هوية جديدة بينما ادعت فئة صغيرة العكس لكنها اعتبرت أن هويات اللغة الأجنبية الخاصة بهم مكملة لهويات اللغة الأم وليست في صراع معها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ ثقافة؛ هوية؛ بناء الهوية؛ العولمة

### Introduction

When people speak a certain language, they are not just involved in the act of information exchange; they are continually constructing a sense of who they are. In other words, people negotiate their identities while speaking (Norton, 1997). In fact, language is not only a tool for communication or information exchange, but is also tightly related to a set of behavioral norms and cultural values that construct one's identity (Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2005).

Identity is more than a by-product of linguistic communication (Joseph, 2004). It is largely established and sustained by language (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Gibson, 2004).

Globalization along with technological development have increased the potential for the creation of dual and hybrid identities (Kanno, 2003; Block, 2008; Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema, 2008). This led to difficulties in categorizing people in groups such as class, race, and gender. This in turn has brought about a growing sense of ambiguity towards one's sense of self (Miyahara, 2010). Ryan (2006) notes that the culture accompanying the language of globalization either subtracts from or adds to the individual's existing cultural identity. According to Shardkova and Pavlenko (2004), English learners undergo significant identity conflicts in the process of learning English. More precisely, studies conducted by Norton (1997) and Bashir-Ali (2006) reveal that some English learners, in the process of assimilation, feel the need to deny their L1 cultures in order to assimilate into the mainstream English academic discourse. Learning an L2 in an English as a second language (ESL) context involves in addition to acquiring linguistic aspects the process of acculturation which results in identity formation.

## Literature Review

### Culture

Because culture is an interdisciplinary concept, it is conceived and used differently (Hudson, 1996). Kramersch (1998) perceives it as "a common system of standards for perceiving believing, evaluating and acting" (p. 10). These standards are shared by individuals who identify themselves as members of a given society or social group and who share a common social space, history, and common imaginings. Members of a given group learn these standards through their interactions with each other. These standards become so

naturalized; that the person retains them even after leaving his own community (Hudson, 1996).

## Identity

The concept of identity is very difficult to explain because of the complexity of its meaning. That is why there is often one-dimensional or incomplete interpretation of this concept. However, the basic meaning of identity refers to where one (a person or a group) belongs, and what is expressed as “self-image” or/and “common-image”, what integrate them inside self or a group existence, and what differentiate them vis-à-vis “others” (Golubović, 2011, p. 57). In other words, identity is our understanding of who we are and of who we think other people are reciprocally. Identities are the ways we relate to and distinguish individuals and groups in their social relations with other individuals or groups (Danielewicz, 2001).

On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent and hence the same over time. In these formulations, our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. It is denoted that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us, at least in some significant ways (Fearon, 2018).

## Cultural identity

Cultural identities were primarily defined as given, and not as a matter of recurring construction, generation, and deconstruction. Cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion (Fearon, 2018). Cultural identity can also be defined as “the relationship between individuals and

members of a group who share a common history, a common language and similar ways of understanding the world” (Norton, 2000, p. 19).

This process involves learning about and accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture. Lustig (2013) notes that cultural identities are central to a person’s sense of self. That is because cultural identities “are central, dynamic, and multifaceted components of one’s self concept” (p. 133). Lustig also points out that cultural identities are dynamic and they exist within a changing social context. As a result, a person’s identity changes as do one’s ongoing experiences in life.

### **Identity construction**

We shape our images or identity through a chain of events in our time-line, our interactions with environments where we were born, grew up, and lived. We shape and are shaped by many elements—culture is just one of these. In the formation of a person, the first step is to adopt a group identity, so as to satisfy his/her need for belonging somewhere as a member of a community (of a family, or a larger community, to the given society or state, to a generation). A person recognizes oneself through the adaptation to the concept of *we* as a primary form of an understanding where one belongs. In this phase, a person accepts norms, believes and experiences of his/her group as a “proper place of living” (Golubović, 2011).

Understanding the identity phenomenon is not straightforward, as it involves many different complex concepts, processes and role-players. Established theories suggest that an identity develops through the interaction (complex cognitive identity formation process) between an individual (with a distinctive self, self-concept and personal identity) and specific social foci or life spheres. It also leads

to a set of behavioral and cognitive outcomes. These preceding and evolving from the identity formation processes.

### **Identity and language**

The interest in exploring the relationship between identity and L2 learning dates back to the late 1980s (Norton, 2008), but is only marginally investigated in the SLA field (Menard-Warwick, 2005). However, in recent decades, many studies focused on this topic (e.g., Belz, 2002; Block, 2007; Burck, 2011; Chik & Benson, 2008; Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007; Kanno, 2003; Mills, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackedge, 2003; Toohey, 2000). The findings of these investigations show that people experience life differently when they speak different languages. This happens especially when the languages involved have substantial differences, such as English and Arabic (Pavlenko, 2006). It is worth mentioning here that the way identities are affected by L2 learning can be different depending on whether the L2 is learned in an ESL or EFL context.

### **L2 identity construction in the EFL context**

Most studies on how the learning of English as L2 affects identity have attempted to explore the experiences of immigrant learners in host countries where English represents a dominant means of communication (e.g., Belz, 2002; Kanno, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko, 2001, 2003). However, relatively few studies have been conducted of EFL learners' identity construction in their homeland contexts where L1 not L2 is the dominant means of communication, where there is no chance of immersion and the only source of exposure to L2 is the educational setting. The findings from the ESL contexts are anticipated, considering the geographical movement and the societal and psychological changes of the learners. Yet, in the EFL context, the immediate classroom context and the surrounding

educational culture are the only sources of exposure (Block, 2007).

Both natural acquisition and formal teaching can create, strengthen, or weaken the relationship between language and identity (Byram, 2006). While research has shown that in real life, L2 learner identity construction is a complex interplay of various variables (Kim, 2003), in the classroom, however, there are only two main factors that can affect learner identity construction—teaching approaches and textbooks (Zacharias, 2010). Gao, Li, and Li (2002) studied the development of three college learners’ identities in China. They maintain that EFL learning is a fundamental part of students’ identity construction. Some studies argue that the identity conflict caused by L2 learning in the EFL context is not as severe as that of the ESL one. In the EFL, it still gives learners new viewpoints on their own society and culture and an opportunity to critically examine it (Gao, 2008; Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011). Norton (2001, 2006) stated that “imagination” is an important factor with which EFL learners view themselves as members of the community they desire. This leads them to create new identities which do have psychological reality (Gao, 2010). The present empirical study aims to fill the gap in the field of cultural studies in the Algerian EFL context by attempting to answer the following questions:

1. How does learning English affect EFL learners’ cultural identity?
2. Do EFL learners’ construct a new L2 identity as a result of learning English?

## Methodology

### Population, sample, and research instruments

Before data gathering tools are introduced, the choice of the method should be accounted for. The present study

attempts to find out the effect of English language on EFL learners' cultural identity. For this aim, the descriptive method was opted for as it determines the status of the phenomenon under investigation. The issue of cultural identity can be best investigated through an ethnographic framework. Therefore, a questionnaire and an interview were both employed as data gathering tools and a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) was used for this study. The questionnaire was regarded an appropriate tool as "it affords a good deal of precision and clarity, because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 171). Moreover, it enables the researcher to collect standardized answers since all the participants respond to the same questions and saves him/her time and effort either in data collection or handling (Dornyei, 2003).

Participants of the study were English major Master 2 students of Language and Culture at Batna 2 University, Algeria. This population was chosen because Master 2 students have the longest career of English language learning and therefore their cultural identities are likely to be influenced the most. Moreover, they are the most mature and aware learners of the concept of identity thanks to the option they study (Language and Culture). The population consists of 178 students. Because it is practical to deal with this number, sampling becomes needless and all the students were selected as the target population of the present study.

All participants were administered a questionnaire developed by the researcher (see Appendix 1). They were given enough time to answer it. In the second phase, which was mainly conducted as a triangulation, only 50 Master 2 Language and Culture learners were selected randomly from among those who were voluntarily willing to participate in the present study's semi-structured interview. It was designed by the researcher too (Appendix 2).



## **Questionnaire and interview's description, piloting and administration**

We chose to use mostly open–response questions for the questionnaire and interview. Although fully closed-answer or multiple-choice survey would have made for more easily quantifiable results, we wanted the participants to give thought to the questions and to express their opinions in their own words. Answers of open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. For the questionnaire, it was divided into three sections: Section 1 concentrated on demographic or personal information. Section 2 focused on the learners' attitudes towards Arabic and English while Section 3 was concerned with the effect of English language on EFL students' cultural identity. For the interview, it consisted of 5 open-ended questions. As the topic of English and cultural identity could be seen as controversial or sensitive, we paid careful attention not to include questions which could be described as *loaded*, in that we avoided words which are emotionally charged. Questions that may cause embarrassment or those that could be considered culturally insensitive were also avoided.

Because piloting is an important step that does not only help the researcher identify any irrelevant questions or any problems with the survey instruments that might cause biased answers but also tests the validity and reliability of the items (Hazzi & Maldaon, 2015), both research instruments were piloted with four colleagues from the English department of Batna 2 University. Taking into consideration their feedback, some items were reworded and others omitted. Then, the questionnaire and the interview were finalized. The participants answered the questionnaire in a regular session of Intercultural Interactions that the researcher herself teaches. The interviews were conducted in the researcher's office.

## **Analysis and discussion**

## Analysis and interpretation of the questionnaire's data

### Learners' profile

Table 1 Learners' general information

Gender	Male	Female		
N	43	135		
(%)	(24.16)	(75.84)		
Age	between [22-26] years old	Between [26-30] years old	between [30-34] years old	More than 34 years old
N	80	58	31	9
(%)	(44.94)	(32.58)	(17.41)	(5.62)
Living or learning overseas	Yes	No		
N	1	177		
(%)	(0.56)	(99.34)		

Note. n = number of learners, % = percentage of learners

Among the 178 participants, there were 43 male and 135 female students. Concerning their age, those aged between 22 and 26 were the most dominant. As can be seen from Table 1, all the participants have not been abroad for a learning experience except one who spent three years in a non-English-speaking country (Ukraine). It is worth mentioning here that the learners' general information is to help foreground the study's context but it will not be used for a detailed factor analysis.

### Attitudes towards Arabic and English

The second section of the questionnaire began with investigating the learners' opinions of the importance of having a cultural identity. All of them think that having one is very important because it is like a mirror which reflects who we are. Moreover, it makes people differ from each other, and without roots and origins, any person will be lost. The participants were then asked about the assessment of themselves as speakers of the English language in question 4 "*Would you say that you are a bilingual/multilingual person? (One of the languages that you speak fluently is English)*". One hundred and twenty-two (122) said *yes*, 37 chose *no*, and 19 did not answer at all. Although the terms *bilingual/multilingual* were explained in brackets, some respondents did not fully understand the explanation. The two following questions were formed out in order to know the language attitudes that the informants have towards the position of both English and Arabic in Algeria. Question 5 was the most disagreed on. While 82 informants thought that everyone in Algeria should learn English, 97 answered "only if necessary".

### **Language and cultural identity**

The first question that dealt directly with cultural identity is question 8. It was general in the sense that it asked whether or not the increasing need for and use of the English language in Algeria has changed the cultural identity of Algerian people in some way. The matter was then brought to a personal basis with question 9 "*Do you think that learning the English language has changed your cultural identity?*" For both questions the given answer options were "yes" and "no", which were followed by an open question "in both cases, how?". Answers to these questions show that the informants found it easier to assess how learning English affected the cultural identity of the Algerian people as a whole rather than

that of their own. To question 9, 134 students said that studying English as a foreign language did not affect their cultural identity at all because they learn it, as one of them justified, “in order to communicate with its native speakers successfully and not to adopt their culture”, 3 confessed that it largely did, 9 thought that their cultural identity was somehow affected, and 32 said that it is hard to say.

The thematic analysis opted for in order to categorize the respondents' answers to the open-ended question yielded the following categories: knowledge of the target culture, acquisition of new perspectives, acquisition new ways of thinking, development of tolerance, adoption of western lifestyle. For the first category, students state that learning English enabled them learn about the culture of the countries where it is spoken as a first language: “Because I knew English, I managed to get to know about the cultures of the English language territories.”, one of the respondents said. Another aspect in which learning English influenced the participants is building tolerance: “Learning English didn't affect my identity as much as it enabled me to build tolerance towards different cultures. I came to realise that nobody should be judged by his or her culture.”. Another student tackled the issue of tolerance from identity's perspective. S/he stressed, “Learning English affected my identity positively in the way that it let me realize that there is no right identity or culture. All we should do is accept each other's identities.”

Though the categories “acquisition of new perspectives” and “acquisition new ways of thinking” may seem synonymous to the reader, they are in fact different. The former means the acknowledgment and realization of the existence of other ways of thinking different from the Algerian one and ability to use them as tools in order to view things from a new perspective. “New ways of thinking”, on the other hand, refers to a more discreet process in which the

English language learner's ideas seem to have changed without conscious efforts. For one informant, "Algerian people who speak English inevitably and unconsciously change some ways of thinking."

### **Analysis of the interview's data**

The first question in the interview asked whether or not the participants acquired new beliefs or worldviews during the period of learning English. Responses to this question were divided into two groups. The first group, consisting of 48 out of 50 participants, believed that they never did. The majority of these responses (29) did not only answer the question but also entailed that the question itself is illogical as people's worldviews have nothing to do with the languages they learn. When asked about the factors responsible for causing people to acquire new beliefs or worldviews, they proposed the following: (a) the type of one's upbringing, (b) the fluctuation or decisiveness of one's personality, (c) the age of starting to learn English (the younger, the more affected), (d) the amount of exposure to English, and most importantly, (e) the experience of living or studying abroad, especially in an ESL context. Nineteen respondents (19) did not give hints about the nature of the question, but stated that their poor linguistic proficiency is the reason behind not acquiring new beliefs and worldviews as a result of learning English.

The second group of responses to the first question consists of two participants. They claimed that they acquired new beliefs and worldviews. They justified this by giving some examples comparing their current state as opposed to the previous one i.e. before learning English. For instance, differences between the L1 and L2 cultures enabled them to look at things more open-mindedly. Others mentioned that they become more flexible about different issues such as religion, women's freedom, freedom of speech and expression, etc. There were also participants who confessed

the learning English caused them to become more self-centered i.e. giving priority to their own interests and goals rather than those of others. For the aspect of religion, the two participants who stated that learning English led them to acquire new beliefs and worldviews stressed that their faith remains unaffected by foreign language learning and that they still have a firm belief in the Islamic doctrine.

When asked about the effect of learning English on identity, most of the participants (48 out of 50) stated that learning a foreign language does not lead to the formation of a new identity because a person is not someone else while communicating in English. Moreover, English is just a school subject or university major and its use is limited to the classroom only. In the respondents' eyes, due to the inequality of the exposure to L1 and L2, one cannot claim to have two distinct equal identities. Besides, most of the participants who thought that learning English does not lead to the formation of a new identity expressed their proud of having only one Algerian Muslim identity.

Only two participants claimed to have formed new L2 identities as a result of learning English. However, they clarified that their L2 identities complement their L1 identities and are not in conflict with them. This is in line with Jabur's (2008) study which reached the same results. It is worth mentioning here that the students who said that they constructed an L2 identity are Kabyle and claimed to have three identities. Those who have more identities were asked to differentiate between the self-image of their distinct identities. They described their English self as independent, flexible, attractive, positive, self-confident, individualistic, and assertive. However, their Algerian Muslim Arab and Kabyle identities were described as conservative, restrained, collectivistic, less self-confident, etc.

Findings of the present study are not in line with those of previous research conducted in EFL contexts which indicated that English-major students mostly experience new identity formation. Failure of the majority of the present study's participants to construct a second identity can be due to many reasons. One of them is that English is still taught outside its sociocultural context in Algerian schools and universities. Another reason might be these students are conservative i.e. they tend to reject non-local cultures.

### Conclusion

After having analyzed the questionnaire's and interview's data, now an attempt is made to draw a conclusion of the obtained results to see what students at the department of English Language and Literature of Batna 2 University think about the impact of learning English on EFL learners' cultural identity. Results showed that all of them agree that English is the language of science and technology. However, in spite of its importance, the majority of respondents claimed that learning it as a foreign language can never change their cultural identity or cause them to construct an English identity. They emphasized that being a learner of English means just a job, a hobby, or a door to another world but never a new way of life.

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Dear student(s),

This questionnaire is part of a research study that attempts to pinpoint the effect of learning English on Algerian EFL learners' cultural identity. As there is no right or wrong answer, please answer all the questions as honestly as you can. The data you provide in this questionnaire will be

handled in an anonymous basis and will be used for research purposes only. Your cooperation in this regard is highly valued and appreciated.

Please tick the answer you think the most appropriate, or provide relevant information in the provided space.

**Section I: Students' General Information**

**1. Gender:**  Male  Female

**2. Age:** Is your age:

Between [22-26] years old  Between [26-30] years old

Between [30-34] years old  More than 34 years old

**3. Did you study for your degree(s) overseas or have you had any overseas English learning experience?**

Yes, Which country / countries? .....  No

**Section II: Attitudes towards Arabic and English**

**4. Would you say that you are a bilingual/multilingual person? (One of the languages you speak fluently being English).**

Yes  No

**5. Do you think that everyone who lives in Algeria should learn English?**

Yes  No  Doesn't matter

**6. Do you feel that the Arabic language is an important element of the Algerian culture?**

Yes  No  Don't know

**Section III: English and Cultural Identity**

**7. In your opinion, is it important to have a cultural identity?**

Yes  No

Justify your answer in both cases.

.....  
**8. Do you think that the increasing need for and use of the English language in Algeria has changed the cultural identity of the Algerian people in some way?**

Yes  No

Justify your answer please.

.....  
**9.** Do you think that learning English and its culture has affected your cultural identity?

Yes  No

Justify your answer please.

.....  
**Appendix 2: Interview**

Please answer the following questions.

1. Do you think by learning English you have acquired new beliefs and worldviews?
2. Do you think learning and/or using English has affected the way you think and perceive certain issues? If yes, please mention them.
3. How is your experience affected and formed as a result of learning English as a foreign language?
4. Have you constructed a new identity as a result of learning English as a foreign language?
5. Do you feel you have two identities or more (two or more personalities), one of them is L2 identity? If yes, how are these identities similar and/or different from each other?

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